

A Thank-You and a Suggestion for Compassion as We Enter the High Holiday Season

AUGUST 31, 2020

Dear congregational leadership,

All of you – clergy and synagogue professionals, board members and volunteers.

Thank you. You are extraordinary. You have made decisions about things that didn't exist six months ago. You've created new pathways for engagement and pivoted to new forms of programming and virtual experiences. You've mourned, celebrated, comforted, and reached out in new ways. And you are planning for an extraordinary High Holiday season, literally. Every congregation in our movement will be doing something they've never done before at the most special, heightened, holy, high-pressure time of year.

We also know that you are tired. We can tell. You are energized and motivated and called. That's apparent, too. And it's driving you to work even harder at a time when we are all experiencing multiple levels of trauma.

Yet there is one additional thing we want to ask of you as we enter this unusual high holy season.

As we talk to leaders of every type in our congregations, we take note of the hard work everyone is putting in to do the best possible job maintaining the community and creating moments of



connection, celebration, and observance – and we take note of the incredibly high stress levels of everyone involved. Noticing all of this, we ask you for added compassion right now, for each other and for ourselves.

Here are five principles of compassion and caring we should all be keeping in mind throughout the next seven to eight weeks and beyond.

1. SERVE UP EXTRA DOSES OF FORGIVENESS AND GRATITUDE.

Mistakes will be made; perfection is not the goal for our holy days this year. Video feeds will be dropped; audio will get out of sync. Someone will have a power failure somewhere. Someone's child or cat or the construction crew next door will interrupt the flow. The sermon will hit a different note than you had hoped and the sound on your computer speakers will not be as good as that in the sanctuary.

Let's prepare our "It's OK; we know you care and are trying so hard" lines right now. Let's even consider saying them right now. Expressing extra gratitude and forgiveness is more appreciated this year than ever before. Reach out to your entire congregation leadership team today and offer them your caring and confidence about the High Holiday season. And do the same thing during the Days of Awe themselves.

2. CHANGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE WORKPLACE.

The distinction between work and life has been blurred because most of us are working from home. This hits each person differently – but people in crowded home spaces are under more pressure than those with space. People who are alone are suffering a different pain. The definition of decorum has changed, and the ability to be available at any time of night or day has shifted. Clergy and other congregational staff are not immune to the same challenges faced by all people trying to work from home. And now that children are back in virtual classrooms, parents are facing an additional stressor.

We need to be sensitive to all of these different situations when we act as employers, supervisors, co-workers, volunteers, and employees. We need to relax the rules and give people the benefit of the doubt that they are doing their best.

3. DO NOT INSIST THAT PEOPLE COME INTO THE BUILDING IF THEY DON'T FEEL SAFE.

It's still not safe for us to gather in person, and for some people, it won't be safe for a long time. Our clergy, staff, lay leaders and volunteers with health issues or who live with people who have health issues will not be able to return to public spaces for quite some time. We should not be pressuring them to do so now, even if there are examples out there of folks gathering in person or working from their office.

Also remember that they may not wish to share the details of their health situation or that of members of their households, and we must respect their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

4. DON'T COMPARE HIGH HOLIDAY EXPERIENCES.

Every congregational leadership team is creating something entirely new. Every congregation has different resources, skills, bandwidth, and culture. There is no rule book for what we're all doing this year.

Whatever your clergy and leadership team have put together is going to be unique and special, and it's possible that not everything will work. Be appreciative, and remember that in the end, it's not production values that matter, but finding ways to be together while safely apart.

5. GIVE EACH OTHER SOME TIME OFF.

All of us – let's find a time to shut down for a few days. For some of you, it might mean cancelling all programming on September 29-30 or October 12-13. For others it might mean granting a few extra vacation days to be taken some time in October. Some congregations might cancel board and committee meetings or all adult ed classes in the period right after the holidays. Your community is unique, and you can design the break in a way that fits who you are. What is not unique is the need for the break. Please take one, and be understanding that staff will particularly need a break.

By taking these principles to heart, we will strengthen our communities. Strong communities are sacred communities, and sacred communities are those in which people care for one another. In caring for each other, in allowing each other to do simply the best we can realistically do, and in creating an expectation of time to recover from the tremendous effort of putting together these high holy days, we will be better able to withstand the added stress of these pandemic times, and eventually emerge from it ready to face the work of rebuilding our communities.

We wish you a *shanah tovah u'metukah* – a sweet and healthy new year.

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